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SUBJECT: GERMAN MUSLIMS RESPOND CALMLY TO POPE'S REMARKS

REF: (A) VATICAN 199 (B) BERLIN 2069

¶1. (U) Summary and Comment. Muslim organizations in Germany reacted calmly, but critically, to the Pope's September 12 remarks in Regensburg. There have been no demonstrations to our knowledge and no violent incidents. Muslim organizations have also accepted the Pope's subsequent apology and our contacts see no lasting damage to Muslim-Christian relations in Germany or to plans for a September 27 Islam Dialog, hosted by the Interior Minister, on the status of Islam in Germany. Mission Germany's Muslim outreach efforts have given us access and influence with a broad spectrum of the Muslim population. We have welcomed and encouraged their moderate responses, both to the speech and to the ensuing outcry from some corners of the Muslim world. End Summary.

¶2. (U) German Muslim organizations and prominent individuals responded critically, but calmly and with appeals for a restrained response, to the Pope's September 12 remarks in Regensburg linking Islam and violence. The Muslim community here is not very well organized, owing to the many ethnic and confessional lines within it. Following the Pope's September 17 apology, we spoke with representatives of Ditib, Germany's largest Muslim organization (affiliated with the Turkish Ministry of Religion). They described the apology as "very reassuring" and cited as particularly "to the point" Benedict's assurances that he did not share the opinion cited in the quote. Ditib issued a press statement criticizing the speech as showing a lack of understanding of Islam, rejecting the thesis that Islam grew through violence, and appealing for mutual respect.

¶3. (U) A representative of a conservative Muslim group in Hamburg, considered by German authorities as at least potentially extremist, told ConGen Hamburg they have told their adherents not to react with protests, despite their unhappiness. An Imam in Bavaria told us that the Pope's remarks were a disappointment rather than an outrage and was asking his community for patience and openness to dialog. Outside religious organizations, Lale Akguen, an SPD member of the Bundestag, said that criticism of the Pope's statement should not be used to create misunderstanding or polarization. Green European Parliament member Cem Oezdemir said on Sept. 15 that, though the remarks were "clumsy," demands for an apology "were exaggerated." A contact in Saxony told ConGen Leipzig that his organization found the Pope's statement confusing and did not plan to issue a statement. Post is unaware of any demonstrations or violent incidents related to the Pope's remarks.

¶4. (U) Our contacts were of different views on the impact of the controversy on Muslim-Christian dialogue in Germany. Some saw no danger, while others thought it did make dialog at the community level more difficult. Our contacts agreed, however, that there was no threat to the planned September 27 Islam Dialogue (Ref B). Interior Minister Schaeuble, who will host the Dialog, said in the September 18 "Der Spiegel"

that the incident demonstrated how necessary such a conference was. Our Ditib contacts also emphasized the Turkish decision to go ahead with the Pope's planned visit there. (Comment: The views of the Turkish government are particularly influential with the roughly 2 million Muslims of Turkish origin in Germany. End Comment) The Central Council of Muslims in Germany "greeted the Pope's clarification" in a statement that also called on "Muslims, scholars, and responsible politicians of the whole world to contribute to a further calming of the situation given the Pope's clarifying words."

15. (U) German media covered the story intensively, and editorial opinion generally took the line that the Pope's remarks were ill-advised and had been misunderstood or perhaps deliberately distorted by Muslims. The press has been increasingly critical of the reaction in the Muslim world, suggesting that reactions there tended to reinforce the image of Islam as a violent and aggressive threat to western values, notably freedom of speech. The government has not issued any official statement on the controversy; the Chancellor's spokesman told the "Frankfurter Rundschau" that the affair was "an issue between religions, in which one shouldn't mingle."

16. (U) Politicians have largely sought to avoid on the record comment, though the Pope's German background provides a significant reserve of support. Chancellor Merkel sought to shift the focus away from the text quoted by Benedict, emphasizing the Pope's "decisive and uncompromising renunciation of all forms of violence in the name of religion," and reiterating her own support for a dialog between religions. In his Spiegel interview, Interior Minister Schaeuble begged off commenting, on the basis that he "belonged to those bad people who, since Martin Luther, had fallen away from the holy Roman church" but added that there should be a way to cite an ancient text if one doesn't identify with it.

TIMKEN JR